

Sunday, June 30th 2013 became the longest and darkest day and night of my life to date.

In the late afternoon hours of the Yarnell Hill Fire, 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots were confirmed deceased—over run and entrapped by erratic fire behavior associated with thunder cell winds that caused a 4 mile fire run in 20 minutes.

As darkness fell, the fire rested and no additional significant fire runs or acreage were recorded. The Yarnell Hill Fire had staked its claim.

By personal choice, I have worked 40 fire seasons within a risk laden profession that attracts possibly the most self-disciplining professionals known! My colleagues and comrades in the wildland fire arena are my most harsh critics. This characteristic makes me who I am! This valued characteristic eliminates those who can't take sharp and timely constructive criticism. It's the very backbone of what makes each wildland fire responder better and creates integrity and an intense sincere desire to strive for excellence.

Following the 2000 Cerro Grande Fire in Los Alamos, NM, I was introduced to AND resisted at first, a new management approach to fire; specifically wildfire management. I attended one of the first gatherings to discuss High Reliability Organizations and the characteristics that define the ability to better manage the UNEXPECTED. Over time, I found this tool to be very useful. High reliability organizational characteristics began to shape my leadership style and leader's intent delivery as a newly certified Incident Commander in 2004 and this training had guided me well to June 30, 2013.

In my worst nightmare, I NEVER imagined that I would be in proximity as an Incident Commander to very possibly the worst tragedy in wildland firefighter loss since the historic and precedent setting fires of 1933 and 1910! We had never suffered the loss of an entire crew--- now on the Yarnell Hill Fire in west-central Arizona, 19 Granite

Mountain Hotshots had become historical statistics we call 'fatalities'.

We train wildland fire line supervisors to assess and take charge. Battlefield -fire line decisions are made using ALL of the best information available based on decades of experience and training. We will never know what Granite Mountain supervisors saw on Sunday afternoon, June 30th. Nor will we completely know all the conversations preceding their decision to move the crew out of the 'hard black'. Whatever they saw, whatever the situation at that time; confirmed their confidence that they had the time and safety margin necessary to move. I stand resolute and IMMOVABLE behind this announcement and decision to move. The situation changed very quickly and the decision was compromised, leaving nowhere to evade the fire's intense assault.

I would NOT wish this tragedy upon my worst enemy! However, I would NOT trade places with anyone! There is no time like now to LIVE for the legacy of safety for our wildland fire fighters! The 'gorilla' is still in the room! He ALWAYS has been! AND he ALWAYS will be! We must never forget---we must NEVER rest---we must ALWAYS remember!

We ALL keep asking, 'WHAT could we have done differently?' It IS human nature to want to know WHAT happened! This effort attempts to humanize an explanation that could make us all feel better...HOWEVER, we just don't know ALL the facts! Furthermore, IF we are truly sincere of the statement we have uttered AND heard literally hundreds of times in the past weeks--'OUR heartfelt thoughts and prayers go out to the families of these fallen heroes!' THEN we must realize and personally ACT NOW to STOP the speculation, questions, and cynicism of Monday morning quarterbacking! It will NOT bring back 19 of our best and finest comrades!

I AM committed to learning the most I possibly can from this tragedy! The risk and exposure of the wildland fire ground is well documented, however, there will ALWAYS be necessary decision space at the

battlefield-fire line level. Wildfire conditions are NEVER static—“A firefighter utilizing the best available science, equipment, training, and working within the scope of agency doctrine and policy, can still suffer serious injury or death.”¹

Roy A. Hall—Yarnell Hill Fire Incident Commander—June30 & July 1, 2013

¹ Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations-January 2013 NFES 2724